

# Crawford Notch

## "A Great Artery"



Crawford Notch and train station from the porch of Crawford House, Ca. 1900-1906. Library of Congress

A main route to Mount Washington was through Crawford Notch, which follows the Saco River to Saco Lake—just southeast of here. Like much of the rest of northern New England, Crawford Notch was part of the homeland of the Abenaki tribe of Native American people; it saw its first European visitors in 1771. Thirty-three years

later, in 1803, the Tenth New Hampshire Turnpike opened through the Notch connecting with turnpikes running north and west. It was a vital link between the upper Connecticut River Valley and the seacoast, in particular Portland, Maine and a major route for goods going north and agricultural and forest products going south. In 1875 the Portland & Ogdensburg Railroad, which had to be blasted out through the Notch's sheer stone cliffs, opened in the same corridor, providing direct access for visitors to the west side of Mt. Washington. In the 20th century, the Teddy Roosevelt Highway running from Portland, Maine to Portland, Oregon was routed through the Notch where today U.S. Route 302 is located.

*The romantic pass of the Notch is a great artery, through which the life-blood of internal commerce is continually throbbing between Maine, on one side, and the Green Mountains and the shores of the St. Lawrence, on the other.*

Nathaniel Hawthorne, "The Ambitious Guest," 1835



Postcard of what was known as "The Great Cut" in Crawford Notch ca. 1915-1930  
Museum of the White Mountains, Plymouth State University



Postcard showing Crawford House (rear) and the road and rail line through Crawford Notch, 1908-1909  
Museum of the White Mountains, Plymouth State University



1885 photograph of the first (wrought iron) Frankenstein Trestle, built by the Portland & Ogdensburg Railroad in 1875. In 1892 it was replaced with the current steel trestle which still carries excursion trains through Crawford Notch. Library of Congress



Postcard showing "Tug of War Hill" in Crawford Notch  
Douglas Philbrook Collection, whitemountainhistory.org



Thomas Hill, *Crawford Notch*, 1872

[Note the Willey House centered in the painting] New Hampshire Historical Society Collection

## The Crawford Family



Thomas Johnson, Abel Crawford  
Samuel A. Drake, "The Heart of the White Mountains," 1882

The Notch was named for Abel Crawford; he and his family were key early promoters of the area, innkeepers, guides, turnpike builders and investors. Crawford arrived in 1792 and built a cabin just north of here but soon moved 12 miles south into the Notch and eventually established an inn. In the Notch, the Crawford family constructed the Notch House and Crawford House, the latter one of the White Mountains' grand hotels. Their first homestead remained in the family and also became an inn; it was later the site of the Fabyan House and rail station three quarters of a mile to the north of here.



The Old Mount Crawford House at Bemis ca. 1800- 1900) Frederick W. Kilbourne, "Chronicles of the White Mountains," 1916

*The next morning, the light smoke was seen stealing from the cottage chimney up the mountain side. Within, the fire was yet smouldering on the hearth, and the chairs in a circle round it, as if the inhabitants had but gone forth to view the devastation of the Slide, and would shortly return, to thank Heaven for their miraculous escape.*

Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864)

"The Ambitious Guest" 1835 (based on story of the Willey Family)



A ca.1915-1930 postcard of the "old" Willey House (c.1793- right) and attached Willey Hotel (1845) (left). Both burned in 1899, however the site continued to be a tourist attraction well into the 20th century. Museum of the White Mountains, Plymouth State University



W. H. Bartlett, *The Willey House* Frederick W. Kilbourne, "Chronicles of the White Mountains," 1916

## The Willey Tragedy

The Notch was central to the history of White Mountains tourism in another respect. In August 1826, Notch innkeepers Samuel and Polly Willey, their children, and two hired hands abandoned their house to escape a landslide that ended up killing them but leaving their house entirely unscathed. The Willeys' mysterious fate inspired poems, books, articles, and paintings—adding to the mystique of the area and greatly increasing tourism. In the years that followed, writers, artists, and scientists were drawn here to experience the "sublime" – the wild, untouched scenery of the White Mountains. Today much of this scenery is within Crawford Notch State Park.